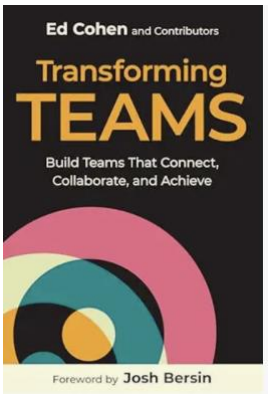
'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

*Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.*



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Transforming Teams: Build Teams That Connect, Collaborate, and Achieve

By Ed Cohen

Book Summary

Prepared by Ed Cohen

TRANSFORMING TEAMS

Relationships First. Performance Follows.

Transforming Teams begins with a problem many leaders recognize: a group of talented people who should have been succeeding together—but were not.

In 1998, Ed Cohen joined Booz Allen Hamilton and became part of a team filled with smart, capable professionals. On paper, everything looked promising. In practice, meetings were tense, communication was strained, and routine work took too long. People were working hard, but not well together.

One evening, after another exhausting day, Ed stood in the parking lot with his colleague Emily King Grandinetta. As they tried to understand what was going wrong, they reached an uncomfortable realization: they had spent too much time observing the team's difficulties and not enough time engaging the team in solving them.

That conversation changed everything.

Instead of assigning blame, Ed and Emily began asking questions. They invited team members to speak honestly about trust, communication, conflict, and the behaviors getting in the way. They brought in an outside consultant, gathered data, and involved the team in interpreting what they learned.

The problem was not a lack of intelligence, effort, or commitment.

It was the culture the team had allowed to form—and the behaviors that culture reinforced.

Together, the team created shared expectations for how people would work with one another. Two of the simplest became among the most powerful:

Praise in public, coach in private.

Take issues to the source rather than to other people.

These were not slogans. They became commitments. Team members practiced them, discussed them, and held one another accountable.

The change did not happen overnight. Some conversations were difficult. Some people resisted. A few chose to leave. But over time, trust deepened, communication opened, and collaboration improved.

Within six months, turnover fell below 3 percent. Engagement increased. Open positions attracted hundreds of applicants. The team that had once struggled to work together became one of the strongest Ed had ever experienced.

That success raised a larger question:

Could this framework work elsewhere?

The answer unfolded over the next 25 years.

Ed and his colleagues carried the approach into organizations around the world. When Ed and his wife and professional partner, Pris Nelson, moved to India and joined Satyam Computer Services, they discovered that trust, collaboration, accountability, and open communication were universal—but the way those principles were demonstrated had to respect local culture.

Direct confrontation might be accepted in one country and deeply uncomfortable in another. A behavior that encouraged openness in one environment could create embarrassment or withdrawal in another.

At Satyam, Pris, Rahul Andrews, Nandini Darsi, Anil Santhapuri, Arunav Sinha, and others helped adapt and strengthen the framework. They brought expertise in executive development, digital transformation, cross-cultural coaching, talent development, and communication. They later carried the framework into other organizations and contributed case studies to the book.

Sheina Laws then helped extend and implement the framework more widely, including at SprintRay.

These experiences shaped the foundation of ***Transforming Teams***: every organization and every team already has a culture. The question is whether that culture has been defined intentionally or allowed to develop accidentally through the behaviors leaders model, tolerate, reinforce, and reward.

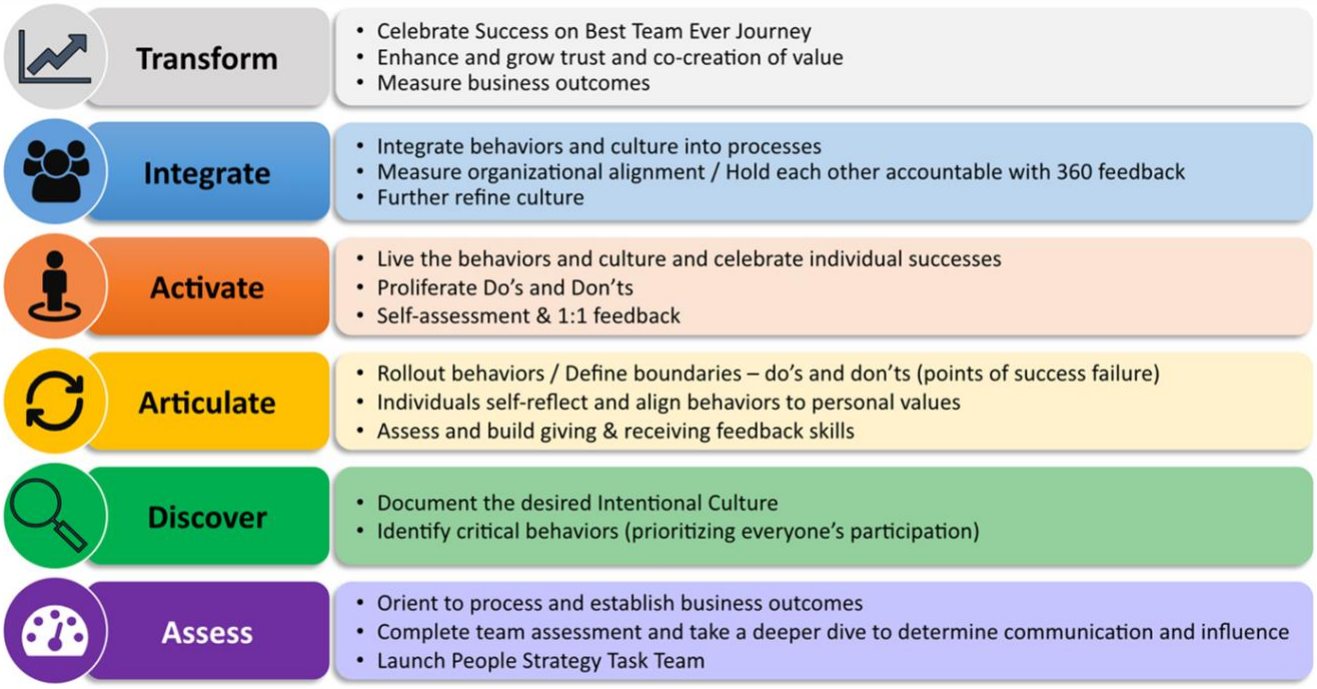
Transforming Teams provides an inclusive framework for people across the organization to examine the culture they have today, define the culture they want to create, and identify the behaviors that will bring it to life.

Those behaviors cannot remain abstract values or words on a wall. They must guide how people communicate, collaborate, make decisions, address conflict, give feedback, recognize performance, develop talent, and hold one another accountable. They must also be embedded in the systems that sustain the organization—from hiring and onboarding to leadership development, performance management, recognition, and promotion.

The work at Booz Allen, Satyam, SprintRay, Western Union, HCL, Warner Bros. Discovery, Polaris, and more than 150 organizations worldwide evolved into the six-phase Transforming Teams framework:

Assess. Discover. Articulate. Activate. Integrate. Transform.

The framework is structured, but not rigid. It is designed to be revisited, refined, and adapted as organizations grow, leadership changes, new challenges emerge, and the needs of employees and customers evolve.



Running through the book are two especially powerful ideas.

The first is the need to balance **high-performance goals** with **transformative behaviors**.

Teams must achieve results. They must meet objectives, serve customers, innovate, grow, and perform. But results alone do not create sustainable excellence. High-performing teams also need behaviors that build trust, strengthen relationships, encourage adaptability, and enable people to contribute fully.

The strongest teams do not choose between performance and culture.

They align them.

The second idea is the **Relationship Chain**, which describes how relationships develop through three stages.

At **share of opportunity**, relationships are largely transactional. People are establishing reliability, credibility, and clarity. The implicit agreement is simple: you do what you said you would do, and I will do the same.

At **share of mind**, people begin working as true partners. They align around common goals, communicate more openly, share responsibility, and navigate difficult conversations together.

At **share of heart**, trust becomes deeper. People feel seen, valued, respected, and connected to one another and to a shared purpose. The relationship moves beyond cooperation into commitment, belonging, and loyalty.

The Relationship Chain is not linear. A broken promise, leadership change, reorganization, unresolved conflict, or failure to follow through can move a person or team backward. Trust must then be rebuilt. The book reminds leaders that strong relationships are not permanent possessions. They require continued attention, credibility, transparency, and care.

Throughout ***Transforming Teams***, stories from organizations around the world show what becomes possible when leaders and teams take culture seriously. Divided groups begin speaking honestly. Siloed functions begin collaborating. Employees who once felt overlooked begin contributing. Leaders move beyond declaring values and start modeling the behaviors they expect from others.

The results were not only behavioral—they were measurable, sustained, and widely recognized.

Organizations featured in the book achieved stronger engagement, lower turnover, improved collaboration, clearer accountability, greater trust, better customer outcomes, and stronger business performance. Many also received significant industry recognition for the cultures and people strategies they created.

Booz Allen Hamilton earned the number-one ranking in both the *Training Top 125*—now known as the APEX Awards—and the ATD BEST Awards, as well as an ATD Excellence in Practice Award for its people strategy.

Satyam also achieved the number-one ranking in the ATD BEST Awards and received an Excellence in Practice Award for its culture transformation.

Western Union earned similar recognition for its work, while CGI and, most recently, SprintRay received ATD Excellence in Practice Awards for their Transforming Teams implementations and results.

The business outcomes reinforced that recognition. At SprintRay, employee net promoter scores increased, turnover fell and remained below 3 percent, and internal promotions rose. At Western Union, cultural transformation contributed to higher engagement and significant cost savings. Other organizations improved cross-functional collaboration, accelerated decision making, strengthened accountability, and became more resilient during periods of disruption and change.

But the deeper message of the book is not that a six-phase framework magically fixes teams.

- It is that teams change when people become intentional.
- They change when leaders replace assumptions with inquiry.
- They change when employees help create the culture rather than having it imposed on them.
- They change when values become visible behaviors.
- They change when people tell the truth, keep commitments, address conflict directly, listen to one another, and recognize that how they work together matters as much as what they accomplish.

Transforming Teams is ultimately both a practical method and a powerful mindset. Tested across industries, countries, cultures, and organizational challenges, the book provides the exact steps, tools, and guidance needed to implement the entire framework—from assessing the current culture to defining behaviors, embedding them into daily operations, measuring results, and sustaining transformation over time.

Its central idea is simple:

Relationships first. Performance follows.

Great teams and great organizations are not accidental.

They are built intentionally.

About the Book Club In this monthly club, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, neuroscience, or coaching. Membership is not required, and there's no obligation to pre-read the book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. Register here for upcoming events. For the full set of discussion summaries, click here.